IN THE CLAIMS:

1-19. (CANCELLED)

20. (ORIGINAL) A computer readable medium containing executable program instructions for use by an intermediate network device having a plurality of ports for receiving and forwarding network messages, the executable program instructions comprising program instructions for:

configuring one or more ports as access ports;

configuring one or more access ports as rapid forwarding ports;

identifying all ports that have been configured as access ports with rapid forwarding; and

upon initialization of the device, placing each identified access port with rapid forwarding directly to a forwarding spanning tree port state, without transitioning such identified ports between any intermediary spanning tree port states, so that network messages may be received and forwarded by such identified ports immediately.

21. (ORIGINAL) The computer readable medium of claim 20 comprising further program instructions for:

monitoring each of the one or more access ports configured with rapid forwarding for receipt of a configuration bridge protocol data unit (BPDU) message; and

in response to receiving a BPDU message at one of the access ports configured with rapid forwarding, placing the respective access port in a blocking spanning tree port state.

22. (ORIGINAL) The computer readable medium of claim 21 wherein the intermediate network device has a memory, and the configuration of ports as access ports with rapid forwarding is stored at the memory.

23. (ORIGINAL) The computer readable medium of claim 21 comprising further program instructions for placing one or more other ports in a listening spanning tree port state, upon initialization of the device.

24. (ORIGINAL) The computer readable medium of claim 20 wherein each access port configured with rapid forwarding is placed in the forwarding state prior to a link-up signal being received at the respective port.

25. (ORIGINAL) The computer readable medium of claim 20 comprising further program instructions for generating and issuing one or more configuration bridge protocol data unit (BPDU) messages from each access port configured as rapid forwarding.

26. (ORIGINAL) The computer readable medium of claim 20 wherein an end station is not coupled to a selected one of the access ports configured with rapid forwarding until after the respective access port is placed in the forwarding spanning tree port state.

27. (ORIGINAL) The computer readable medium of claim 26 comprising further program instructions for generating and issuing one or more configuration bridge protocol data unit (BPDU) messages from each access port configured as rapid forwarding.

28. (NEW) A method comprising:

configuring one or more ports of a network device as access ports;

configuring one or more access ports to have a rapid forwarding designation;

identifying the ports that have been configured as access ports with rapid forwarding designation; and

upon initialization of the network device, placing each identified access port with rapid forwarding designation directly into a forwarding spanning tree port state, without transitioning such identified ports between any intermediary spanning tree port states, to enable network messages to be received and forwarded by such identified ports immediately.

29. (NEW) The method of claim 28 further comprising:

monitoring each of the one or more access ports configured with rapid forwarding port designation for receipt of a configuration bridge protocol data unit (BPDU) message; and

in response to receiving a BPDU message at one of the access ports configured with rapid forwarding designation, placing the respective access port in a blocking spanning tree port state.

30. (NEW) The method of claim 28, wherein the step of configuring one or more access ports further comprises:

selecting with a management protocol, by a network administrator, the one or more access ports to have rapid forwarding designation.

31. (NEW) The method of claim 28 further comprising:

transitioning one or more other access ports that do not have rapid forwarding

designation to a listening spanning tree port state, upon initialization of the device.

32. (NEW) The method of claim 28, wherein each access port configured with rapid forwarding designation is placed in the forwarding state prior to a link-up signal being received at the respective port.

33. (NEW) The method of claim 28 further comprising:

issuing one or more configuration bridge protocol data unit (BPDU) messages from each access port configured to have rapid forwarding designation.

34. (NEW) The method of claim 28, wherein an end station is not coupled to a selected one of the access ports configured with rapid forwarding designation until after the respective access port is placed in the forwarding spanning tree port state.

34. (NEW) An apparatus comprising:

a port configuration entity operable to maintain configuration data that indicates one or more ports of the apparatus are access ports, and that one or more of the access ports have a rapid forwarding designation;

an enhanced spanning tree entity operable to query the port configuration entity and to identify the ports that have been configured as access ports with rapid forwarding designation; and

a state machine engine operable to place each identified access port with rapid forwarding designation directly into a forwarding spanning tree port state, without transition of such identified ports between any intermediary spanning tree port states, to enable network messages to be received and forwarded by such identified ports immediately.

35. (NEW) The apparatus of claim 34 wherein the enhanced spanning tree entity is further operable to monitor each of the one or more access ports configured with rapid forwarding port designation for receipt of a configuration bridge protocol data unit (BPDU) message, and in response to receiving a BPDU message at one of the access ports configured with rapid forwarding designation, to place the respective access port in a blocking spanning tree port state.

36. (NEW) The apparatus of claim 34 further comprising:

a management protocol operable to permit a network administrator to select the one or more access ports to have rapid forwarding designation.

37. (NEW) The apparatus of claim 34 wherein the state machine engine is further operable to transition one or more other access ports that do not have rapid forwarding designation to a listening spanning tree port state, upon initialization of the device.

38. (NEW) The apparatus of claim 34 wherein the state machine engine is operable to place each identified access port with rapid forwarding designation into the forwarding spanning tree port state prior to a link-up signal being received at the respective port.

39. (NEW) The apparatus of claim 34 wherein the state machine engine is operable to place each identified access port with rapid forwarding designation into the forwarding spanning tree port state while the respective port is uncoupled from any end station.

40. (NEW) An apparatus comprising:

means for configuring one or more ports of a network device as access ports;

means for configuring one or more access ports to have a rapid forwarding designation;

means for identifying the ports that have been configured as access ports with rapid forwarding designation; and

means for placing each identified access port with rapid forwarding designation directly into a forwarding spanning tree port state upon initialization of the device, without transitioning such identified ports between any intermediary spanning tree port states, to enable network messages to be received and forwarded by such identified ports immediately.